A Worthless Experiment

by F. Hopkinson Smith

ALL this happened when Marny was poor, before he had little red ribbons and buttons in his lapel—three, at least, all of different colors—and a saddle horse on which to exercise his tired body after a morning's work at his easel and a box-of-a-place up in the woods where he spent a few weeks in the early Summer before he went over to see what was going on at the Royal Academy and at the Salon.

None of these things belonged to Marny at this time. Even his milk was left outside his studio door, and his paper bought at the corner. It was when pulling in this milk one morning that he first made the acquaintance of "Old Sunshine." The cans had got mixed, Marny's pint having been laid at the old man's door and the old man's gill at Marny's, and the rectifying of the mistake—"Old Sunshine" did the rectifying—laid the basis of the acquaintance.

Everybody, of course, in the Studio Building knew him and his old sister by sight, but only one or two well enough to speak to him; none of them to speak to the poor, faded old woman, who would climb the stairs so many times a day, always stopping for her breath at the landing, and always with some little package—a pinch of tea, or a loaf of bread, or fragment of chop—which she hid under her apron if she heard any one's steps. She was younger than her brother by a few years, but there was no mistaking their relationship; their noses were exactly alike—long, semi-transparent noses, protruding between two wistful, china-blue eyes peering from under eyebrows shaded by soft gray hair.

The rooms to which the old sister climbed, and where the brother worked, were at the top of the building, away up under the corridor skylight, the iron ladder to its trap being bolted to the wall outside their very door. It was sunnier up there, the old brother said. One of the rooms he used for his studio, sleeping on a cot behind a screen; the other was occupied by his sister. What little housekeeping was necessary went on behind this door. Outside, on its upper panel, was tacked a card bearing his name:

ADOLPHE WOOLFSEN.

The agent who collected his rent always addressed him correctly. "If it was agreeable to Mr. Woolfsen, he would like to collect," etc. Sometimes it was agreeable to Mr. Woolfsen and sometimes it was not. When it was agreeable—this the janitor said occurred only when a letter came with a foreign post-mark on it—the old painter would politely beg the agent to excuse him for a moment, and shut the door carefully in the agent's face. Then would follow a hurried moving of easels and the shifting of a long screen across his picture. Then the agent would be received with a courteous bow and handed to a chair—a wreck of a chair, with the legs unsteady and the back wobbly, while the tenant would open an old desk, take a china pot from one of the cubby-holes, empty it of the contents and begin to count out the money smiling graciously all the time. When it was not agreeable to pay, the door was closed gently and silently in the agent's face, and no amount of pounding opened it again—not that day, at least.

Old Marny knew what was behind that screen and only Marny divined the old man's reasons for concealing his canvas so carefully; but this was not until after weeks of friendly greeting, including the old sister, whom he once helped up the stairs with a basket—an unusual occurrence for her and, of course, for him. It was a measure of coal and a bundle of wood that made it so heavy. But Marny never suspected—if he did, he never betrayed himself.

"Thank you, sir," she said in her low, sweet, gentle voice, her pale cheeks and sad eyes turned toward him; "my brother will be so pleased. No; I can't ask you in, for he is much absorbed these days, and I must not disturb him."

At first the painter's sobriquet of "Old Sunshine" puzzled Marny; he saw him but seldom, but never when his face had anything sunny about it. It was always careworn and earnest, an eager, hungry look in his eyes.

Botts, who had the next studio to Marny, solved the mystery.

"He's crazy over a color scheme; gone daft on purples and yellows. I haven't seen it—nobody has except his old sister. He keeps it covered up, but he's got a 50x60 that he's worked on for years. Claims to have discovered a palette that will make a man use smoked glasses when his picture is hung on the line. That's why he's called 'Old Sunshine.'"

The next day he kept his studio door open and his ear unbuttoned, and when the old man's steps approached his door on his return from his morning walk—the only time he ever went out—Marny threw it wide and stepped in front of him.

"Don't mind coming in, do you?" Marny laughed. "I've struck a snag in a bit of drapery and can't get anything out of it. I thought you might help——" and before the old fellow could realize where he was, Marny had him in a chair before his canvas.

"I'm not a figure painter," the old man said simply.

"That don't make any difference. Tell me what's the matter with that shadow—it's lumpy and flat," and Marny pointed to a fold of velvet lying across a sofa, on which was seated the portrait of a stout woman—one of Marny's pot-boilers—the wife of a rich brewer who wanted a picture at a poor price—one which afterward made Marny's reputation, so masterful was the brushwork. The old Studio Building was full of just such customers, but not of such painters.

"It's of the old school," said the painter. "I could only criticise it in one way and that might offend you."

"Go on—what is the matter with it?"

The old man rubbed his chin slowly and looked at Marny under his bushy eyebrows.

"I am afraid to speak. You have been very kind. My sister says you are always polite, and so few people are polite nowadays."

"Say what you please; don't worry about me. I learn something every day."

"No; I cannot. It would be cruel to tell you what I think, and Louise would not like it when she knew I had told you, and I must tell her. We tell each other everything."

"Is the color wrong?" persisted Marny. "I've got the gray-white of the sky, as you see, and the reflected light from the red plush of the sofa; but the shadows between—— Would you try a touch of emerald green here?"

The old man had risen from his seat now and was backing away toward the door, his hat in his hand, his bald head and the scanty gray hairs about his temples glistening in the overhead light of the studio.

"It would do you no good, my dear Mr. Marny. Paint is not color. Color is an essence, a rhythm, a blending of tones as exquisite as the blending of sounds in the fall of a mountain brook. Match each sound and you have its melody. Match each tone and you have light. I am working—working. Good-morning."

His hand was now on the door-knob, his face aglow with an enthusiasm which seemed to mingle with his words.

"Stop! Don't go, that's what I think myself," cried Marny. "Talk to me about it!"

The old man dropped the knob and looked at Marny searchingly.

"You are honest with me?"

"Perfectly."

"Then when I triumph you shall see!—and you shall see it first. I will come for you, not yet—not yet—perhaps to-morrow, perhaps next month—but I will come!" and he bowed himself out.

The faded sister was waiting for him at the top of the stairs. She had seen her brother mount the first flight and the fourth, all this by peering down between the banisters. Then he had disappeared. This, being unusual, had startled her.

He had taken off his coat now, carefully, the lining being out of one sleeve. The sister hung it on a nail behind the door, and the painter picked up his palette and stood looking at a large canvas on an easel. Louise tiptoed out of the room and closed the door of her own apartment. When her brother began work she always left him alone. Triumph might come at any moment, and even a word wrongly spoken would distract his thoughts and spoil everything. She had not forgotten—nor never would—how, two years before, she had come upon him suddenly just as an exact tint had been mixed, and, before he could lay it on his canvas, had unconsciously interrupted him, and all the hours and days of study had to be done over again. Now they had a system: when she must enter she would cough gently; then, if he did not hear her, she would cough again; if he did not answer, she would wait, sometimes without food, until far into the afternoon, when the daylight failed him. Then he would lay down his palette, covering his colors with water, and begin washing his brushes. This sound she knew. Only then would she open the door.

Botts had given Marny the correct size of the canvas, but he had failed to describe the picture covering it. It was a landscape showing the sun setting behind a mountain, the sky reflected in a lake; in the foreground was a stretch of meadow. The sky was yellow and the mountain purple; the meadow reddish brown. In the centre of the canvas was a white spot the size of a pill-box. This was the sun, and the centre of the color scheme. Radiating from this patch of white were thousands of little pats of chrome yellow and vermilion, divided by smaller pats of blue. The exact gradations of these tints were to produce the vibrations of light. One false note would destroy the rhythm—hence the hours of thought and of endless trying.

When some carefully thought-out tint was laid beside another as carefully studied, the combination meeting his ideal, he would spring from his seat crying out:

"Louise! Louise! Light! Light!"

Then the little woman would hurry in and stand entranced.

"Oh! so brilliant, Adolphe! It hurts my eyes to look at it. See how it glows! Ah, it will come!" and she would shade her wistful eyes with her hand as if the light from the flat canvas dazzled her. These were gala hours in the musty rooms at the top of the old studio building.

Then there would come along days of depression. The lower range of color was correct, but that over the right of the mountain and near the zenith did not pulsate. The fault lay in the poor quality of the colors or in the bad brushes or the sky outside. The faded sister's face always fell when the trouble lay with the colors. Even the small measure of milk would then have to be given up until the janitor came bearing another letter with a foreign stamp.

Once he had cornered the old man on the stairs, and, throwing aside all duplicity, had asked him the straight question:

"Will you show me your picture? I showed you mine."

"Old Sunshine" raised his wide-brimmed hat from his head by the crown—it was too limp to be lifted in any other way—and said in a low voice:—

"Yes, when it is a picture; it is now only an experiment."

"But it will help me to see your work. I am but a beginner; you are a master."

The good-natured touch of flattery made no impression on the old man.

"No," he answered, replacing his hat and keeping on his way down-stairs; "I am not a master. I am a man groping in the dark, following a light that beckons me on. It will not help you; it will hurt you. I will come for you; I have promised, remember. Neither my sister nor I ever breaks a promise. Good-morning!" And again the shabby hat was lifted.

As the Winter came on, Marny began to miss the tread of the old man outside his door. The old sister never made any noise, so he never knew when she went up and down unless he happened to be on the stairs at the same moment. He knew the old man was at work, because he could hear his ceaseless tramp before his easel—walking up to his picture, laying on a pat of color and walking back again. He himself had walked miles—had been doing it the day before in his efforts to give "carrying" qualities to the shadow under the nose of the brewer's better half.

"I do not see your brother any more," Marny had said to her one morning, after meeting her by accident outside his door carrying a basket with a cloth over it.

"No," she answered. "No; he cannot spare a moment these days. He hardly takes time to eat, and I do all the errands. But he is very happy." Here her face broke into a smile. "Oh, so happy! We both are——"

"And is the great picture finished?" he asked, with a movement as if to relieve her of the weight of the basket.

"Almost.....Almost.....Adolphe will tell you when it is ready. No—please, good Mr. Marny—it is not heavy.

The day following this interview, Marny heard strange noises overhead. The steady tramping had ceased; the sounds were as if heavy furniture were being moved. Then there would come a pattering of lighter feet running in and out of the connecting room. Then a noise as if scrubbing was being done; he thought at one time he heard the splash of water, and even looked up at his own ceiling as if expecting a leak.

Suddenly these unusual sounds ceased, the old man's door was flung open, a hurried step was heard on the upper stairway, and a sharp knock fell upon his own door.

Marny opened it in the face of the old man. He was bareheaded, his eyes blazing with excitement, his face flushed as if by some uncontrollable joy.

"Come! Come!" he cried; "we are all ready. It was perfected this morning! We have been putting things in order. We do not ever have guests, and you might not have understood! But you must be careful—your eyes are not accustomed, perhaps, and——"

Marny darted back without listening to the old man's conclusion, and threw on his coat. The faded sister was up-stairs, and he must be perfectly dressed.

"And you like it!" burst out Marny, as he adjusted his collar and cuffs—part of the old man's happiness had reached his own heart now.

"Like it?—No—it is not something to like! It is not a meal; it is a religion. You are in a fog, and the sun bursts through—you are in a tunnel and are swept out into green fields—you grope in the dark and an angel leads you to the light. You do not 'like' things then—you thank God on your knees. Louise has done nothing but cry."

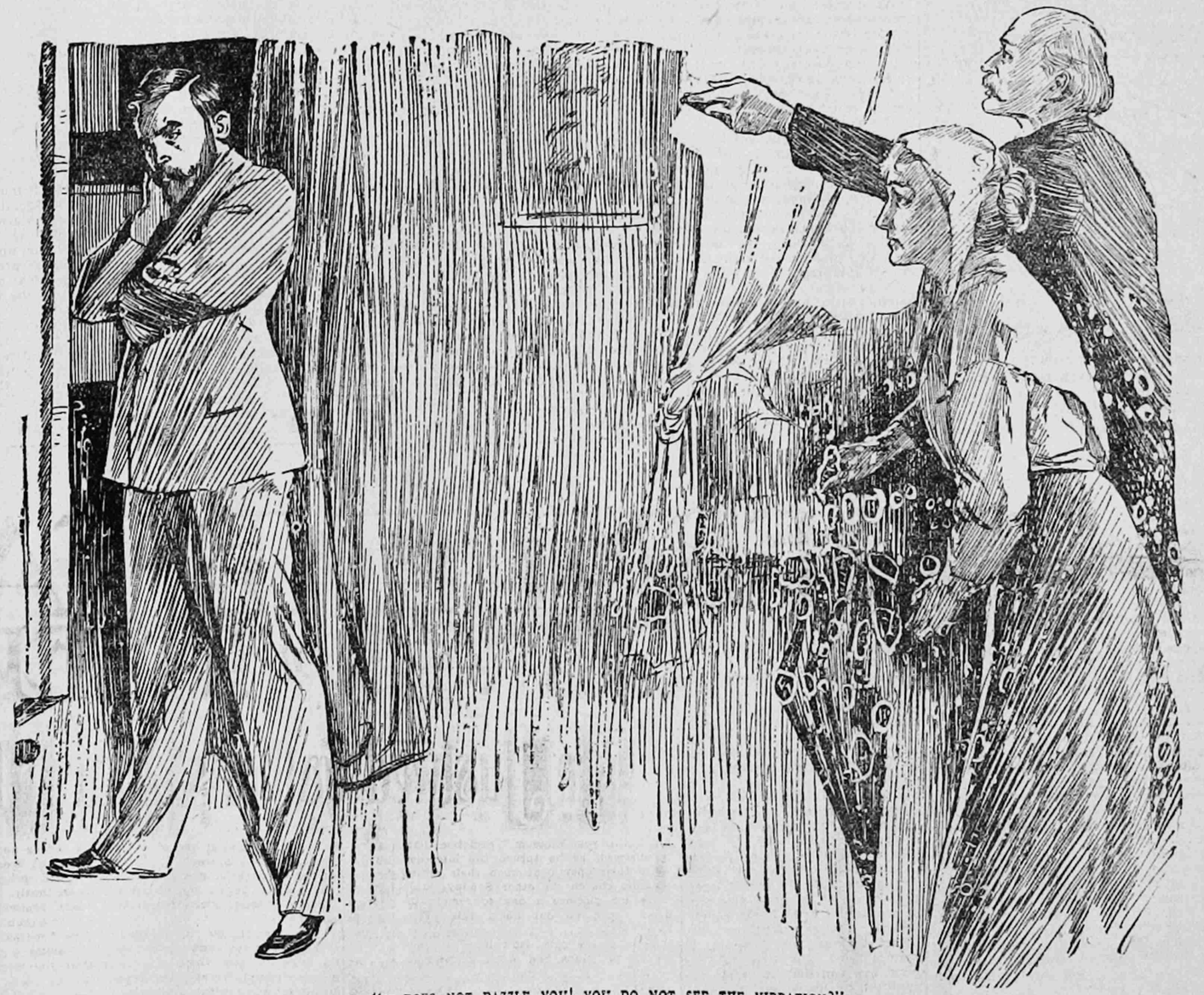
These words came in shortened sentences divided by the mounting of each step, the two hurrying up the stairs, "Old Sunshine" ahead, Marny following.

The sister was waiting for them at the open door. She had a snow-white kerchief over her shoulders and a quaint cap on her head, evidently her best. Her eyes, still red from weeping, shone like flashes of sunshine through falling rain.

"Keep him here, Louise, until I get my umbrella—I am afraid. No; stay till I come for you——" this to Marny, who was, in his eagerness, peering into the well-swept, orderly looking room. "Now shut your eyes until I tell you—you must see nothing but the picture. Now . . . under this umbrella" (he had picked it up just inside the door). "You go first, Louise. Come; you will not fall."

Marny suffered himself to be led into the room, his head smothered under the umbrella, the old man's hand firmly grasping his as if the distance between the door and the masterpiece was along the edge of an abyss.

"Now!" cried the old man, waving the umbrella aside.



"IT DOES NOT DAZZLE YOU! YOU DO NOT SEE THE VIBRATION?"

Marny raised his eyes, and a feeling of faintness came over him.

The old man was reading his face. The faded sister had not taken her eyes from his.

"It does not dazzle you! You do not see the vibrations?"

"I am getting my eyes accustomed to it," stammered Marny. "I cannot take it all in at once." He was hunting around in his mind for something to say—something that would not break the old fellow's heart.

"No! You cannot deceive me. I had hoped better things of you, Mr. Marny. It is not your fault that you cannot see."

The old man had opened the door of his studio now and stood as if waiting for Marny to pass out.

"Yes, but let me look a little longer," protested Marny. The situation was too pathetic to cause offence.

"No—no—please excuse us—we are very happy, Louise and I, and I would rather you left us alone. I will come for you some other time—when my picture has been sent away. Please forgive my sister and me, but please go away."

One morning the janitor opened Marny's door without knocking and closed it softly behind him. He seemed laboring under some excitement.

"He's up at St. Luke's Hospital—they took him there last night," he said in a whisper, jerking his thumb toward the ceiling.

"Who?"

"'Old Sunshine.'"

"Crazy?"

"No; ill with fever, been sick for a week. Not bad, but the doctor would not let him stay here."

"Did the sister go?" There was a note of alarm in Marny's voice.

"No; she is upstairs. That's why I came. I don't think she has much to eat. She won't let me in. Maybe you can get her to talk to you; she likes you—she told me so."

Marny laid down his palette, tiptoed hurriedly up the stairs and knocked gently. There was no response. Then he knocked again, this time much louder, and waited. He heard the rustling of a skirt, but there was no other sound.

"It's Mr. Marny, Madam," he said in the kindest, most sympathetic voice that ever came out of his throat.

The door opened softly, and her face peered through the crack. Tears were in her eyes—old and new tears—following one another down her furrowed cheeks.

"He is gone away; they took him last night, Mr. Marny." Her voice broke, but she still kept the edge of the door in her trembling hand.

"Yes; I have just heard about it. Let me come in, please; I want to help you. You are all alone."

Her grasp slackened, and Marny stepped in. The room was in some confusion. The bed where her brother had been ill was still in disorder, the screen, that had concealed it, pushed to one side. On a table by his easel were the remains of a meal. The masterpiece still stared out from its place. The sister walked to a lounge and sat down.

"Tell me the truth," Marny said, seating himself beside her. "Have you any money?"

"No; our letter has not come."

"What do you expect to do?"

"I must sell something."

"Let me lend you some money. I have plenty, for I shall get paid for my picture to-morrow; then you can pay it back when yours comes."

"Oh, you are so kind, but we must sell something of our own. We owe a large sum; the rent is two months due, and there are other things, and Adolphe must have some comforts. No; I am not offended, but Adolphe would be if he knew."

Marny looked into space for a moment, and asked thoughtfully: "How much do you owe?"

"Oh, a great deal," she answered simply.

"What things will you sell?" At least he could help her in this.

The faded old lady looked up at Marny and pointed to the masterpiece.

"It breaks our hearts to send it away—but there is nothing else to do. It will bring, too, a great price; nothing else we possess will bring as much. Then we will have no more poverty, and some one may buy it who will love it, and so my brother will get his reward."

Marny swept his eye around. The furniture was of the shabbiest; pictures and sketches tacked to the wall, but experiments in "Old Sunshine's" pet theories. Nothing else would bring anything. And the masterpiece! That, he knew, would not bring the cost of its frame.

"Where will you send it to be sold? To an art dealer?" Marny asked. He could speak a good word for it, perhaps, if it should be sent to some dealer he knew.

"No; to a place in Cedar Street, where Adolphe sold some sketches his brother painters gave him in their student days. One by Achenbach—Oswald, not Andreas—brought a large sum. It was a great help to us. I have written the gentleman who keeps the auction room, and he is to send for the picture to-morrow, and it will be sold in his next picture sale. Adolphe was willing; he told me to do it. 'Some one will know,' he said, 'and we ought not to enjoy it all to ourselves.' Then again, 'the problem,' as he calls it, has been solved. All his pictures after this will be full of its beautiful light."

The auction room was crowded. There was to be a sale of French pictures, some by the men of '30 and some by the more advanced impressionists. Many out-of-town buyers were present; a few of them dealers. Marny rubbed his hands together in a pleased way when he looked over the audience and the collection. It was quite possible that some connoisseur from "wayback" would take a fancy to the masterpiece, confounding it with some one of the pictures of the Upside-down School—pictures looking equally well whichever way they may be hung.

The selling began.

A Corot brought $2,700; a Daubibny $940; two examples of the reigning success in Paris $1,100. Twenty-two pictures had been sold.

Then the masterpiece was placed on the easel.

"A Sunrise. By Adolphe Woolfsen of Dusseldorf," called out the auctioneer. "What am I offered?"

There came a pause, and the auctioneer repeated the announcement.

A man sitting by the auctioneer, near enough to see every touch of the brush on "Old Sunshine's" picture, laughed and nudged the man next to him. Several others joined in.

Then came a voice from behind:

"Five dollars!"

The auctioneer shrank a little; a pained, surprised feeling overspread his face, as if some one had thrown a bit of orange peel at him. Then he went on:

"Five dollars it is, gentlemen. Five—five—five!" Even he, with all the tricks of the trade at his fingers' ends, could not find a good word to say for "Old Sunshine's" masterpiece.

Marny kept shifting his feet in his uneasiness. His hands opened and shut; his throat began to get dry. Then he broke loose:

"One hundred dollars!"

The auctioneer's face lighted up as suddenly as if the calcium light of the painter whom "Old Sunshine" despised had been thrown upon it.

"I have your bid, Mr. Marny (he knew him), one hundred—hundred—hundred—one—one—third and last call!"

Marny thought of the gentle old face waiting at the top of the stairs and of the old man's on his pillow. The auctioneer had seen the eager expression and at once began to address an imaginary bidder on the other side of the room—his clerk, really.

"Two hundred—two hundred—two—two—two——"

"Three hundred!" shouted Marny.

Again the clerk nodded:

"Four—four!"

"Five!" shouted Marny. This was all the money he would get in the morning excepting fifty dollars—and that he owed for his rent.

"Five—five—five—third and last call! SOLD! and to you, Mr. Marny! Gentlemen, you seem to have been asleep. One of the most distinguished painters of our time is the possessor of this picture, which only shows that it takes an artist to pick out a good thing!"

Marny's promise had been made with a sad heart, but there was nothing else to do. She would realize then that she must let him help her. It was better that he told her than the auctioneer.

Both of his hands were now held out, his face beaming.

"Wonderful success! Bought by a distinguished connoisseur who won't let the auctioneer give his name."

"Oh, I am so happy! That is really better than the money, and for how much, dear Mr. Marny?"

"Five hundred dollars!"

The faded sister's face fell.

"I thought it would bring a great deal more, but then Adolphe will be content. It was the lowest sum he mentioned when he decided to sell it. Will you go with me to tell him? Please do."

In the office Marny stopped to talk to the doctor, the sister going on up to the ward where "Old Sunshine" lay.

"Will he pull through, the old painter?" asked Marny. "He is a friend of mine."

The doctor tapped his forehead significantly with his fore-finger.

"Brain trouble?" asked Marny in a subdued tone.

"Yes."

"Will he get well?"

The doctor shook his head discouragingly.

"How long will he last?"

"Perhaps a week—perhaps not twenty-four hours."

The faded sister now entered. Her face was still smiling—no one had yet told her about her brother.

"Oh, he is so happy, Mr. Marny!"

"And you told him?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

"And what did he say?"

"He put his arms around me and kissed me, and then he whispered—'Louise, the connoisseur knew!'"

NEXT WEEK: A Guilty Conscience By J. J. Bell